

Show up!  
Let go!  
Get moving!

## A guide to Psychological Flexibility at work

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## Introduction

For many of us, life feels like a constant state of ‘busyness’. When we’re asked how we’re doing at work, we almost feel compelled to respond with “busy!” It’s become a badge of pride. We’ve all got so much on and quite frankly, there’s no end in sight to the work.

Other people and their needs can start to appear like obstacles and we find ourselves letting our mood set the tone for the day. In fact, we sometimes let our emotions take the driving seat and tell us what to do.

But if we take a step back for a moment, we quickly realise that it’s very easy to slip into autopilot, engaging in relentless multi-tasking and giving in to our emotions. Then comes disappointment that we’re not headed where we originally planned, having encountered some real setbacks and disappointments along the way. Work is central to many people’s lives and yet it’s also the source of a lot of discomfort and upset.

This guide provides an accessible introduction to some tools to help you move from ‘surviving work’ to ‘thriving at work’. Our focus is a concept called ‘Psychological Flexibility’, which is an evidence-based approach to improving wellbeing, satisfaction and productivity at work.

It’s about dealing with our thinking and our emotions, getting in touch with our values and putting them into practice.

## A familiar scenario?

You start the day by swinging your legs out of bed and fumbling for your smartphone. Your heart sinks as you've got lots of unread emails from colleagues in Singapore and Australia, as well as the usual batch of messages from colleagues who work too late or start too early.

With a sigh, you start to scroll through them, hoping you'll somehow get to 'inbox zero' at some point today. Your first thought is a plaintive ***"How can I do all this?"***

After a hurried cup of coffee and a shower, you get dressed, thinking about the day ahead. With a growing sense of dread, you remember you have performance appraisals for several members of your team and you haven't had the chance to prepare properly. You experience a brief wave of guilt, followed by the hope that perhaps they can be rescheduled. Actually, you're a little annoyed that looking after your team's performance takes up so much of your time.

You also have a meeting with a client who is angry about the progress your team is making on their project, as well as a meeting with the senior leadership team to discuss budget for the year ahead.

You can feel the tightness grow in your stomach as you mentally play out what will be said at this meeting, and feel annoyed at how you will be challenged on the need for an increase in budget. Is there ***any*** way you can get out of these meetings...?

Grunting a curt 'bye' to your spouse as you leave the front door, you glance at your watch and wince as you realise you won't be able to get a seat on the train. Your gym kit is neatly packed in a bag by the door, but you leave it where it is – you simply don't have time for anything like that today. You brace yourself for the inevitable annoyances, sigh and start walking to the train station, still scrolling through your emails.

## There *is* another way...

Let's be honest, this scenario isn't too outlandish for many of us. We can feel overwhelmed by email, the demands of others and by the way we worry about what's going to happen next.

We often 'act out' using our emotions as the cue for action, rather than the values to which we aspire. This means we do things we later regret and end up apologising to those around us, feeling bad about the whole thing. We can spend our time living in the past, in an imagined future or on 'autopilot' – but seldom in the here and now, giving attention and focus to what's important.

But there *is* another way.

Where we respond to challenges in a more helpful way. Where we deal more positively with unpleasant and unhelpful thoughts and emotions. And we do so by developing the skills we collectively call 'Psychological Flexibility'.



# What is Psychological Flexibility?

Psychological Flexibility is an umbrella term for a set of thinking skills and behaviours that help us maintain focus, deal with life's difficulties and choose responses to challenging situations that are in line with our values, not our temporary emotions.

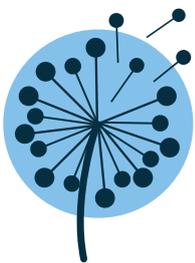
It's a scientific, evidence-based approach to building resilience and increasing wellbeing and performance in the workplace. Rather than waiting for an employee to experience distress and then, for example, seek out stress management, the ethos of this approach is to instead equip people with the tools they need to deal with the inevitable challenges we face at work.

An added bonus, is that in developing these skills, people will find that they also experience benefits outside of work.

The skills can be developed by anyone and centre on three core themes, which we'll explore in more detail later in this guide:



**1. Show up!** Becoming more aware of the present moment and avoid getting caught up in the disappointments of the past or worrying about the future.



**2. Let go!** Accepting that unwelcome thoughts and emotions will occur, but acknowledging that they're not instructions or even "true".



**3. Get moving!** Getting clarity on our values and taking action on a daily basis that is in line with these values.

Psychological flexibility allows us to see thoughts and emotions as transient, helping us be more in touch with our values and allowing us to put them into practice more frequently. It helps us to better deal with unpleasant emotions, setbacks and frustrations, so that we can live a life more in tune with our values. This is beneficial for us on a number of levels: work and life satisfaction, our psychological wellbeing and our productivity at work.

The body of high quality scientific evidence supporting the positive impact of psychological flexibility continues to grow, making it a great starting point for anyone who wants to develop the skills to navigate the everyday challenges we face.

## Who said work was easy?

The workplace comes with many challenges, even when we love what we do. Why? Most of us work interdependently with others. That is, we need them and they need us. Each of us carries around a view of the world and people in it, as well as a life history, a personality and personal values. We have differing working preferences and goals. As much as we would like it to be otherwise, jobs and workload aren't always designed with people's wellbeing in mind.

And so, we find ourselves working hard in the face of external challenges, like:

- Other people and our relationships with them
- Managing our workload and its peaks and troughs
- Dealing with the technology that has permeated most roles and workplaces
- Planning and organising ourselves and others in the face of uncertainty and change
- Dealing with the common setbacks and disappointments that come with work
- Navigating organisational culture, power and politics

Of course, this is far from a finite list of all the things that can make the experience of work a difficult one. In addition to these external challenges, we can also face difficulties that emanate from within us – those that are a function of who we are, our life experience and our interpretations of what’s going on around us. These include:

- Holding on to unhelpfully fixed views of ourselves and others
- Experiencing persistent doubts about our capabilities and skills
- Using our emotions to guide our responses to difficult situations
- Getting caught up with our past or imagined future, while ignoring the present

By developing our psychological flexibility, we can handle our internal challenges more effectively and therefore deal with what’s going on ‘outside’. But first, let’s take a look at what psychological *inflexibility* looks like and how we can make things more difficult for ourselves.

## How we can make things difficult for ourselves

We often use the phrase ‘thinking about our thinking’ in coaching. This means taking the time and energy to reflect on what we’re saying to ourselves and what we do with troubling thoughts and emotions. It means reflecting on the origins of our thoughts and beliefs and how they relate to the emotions we feel and how we behave.

So, when we turn our attention inward and examine our inner life, we’re thinking about our own thinking, our emotions, what we do with them and how it impacts our behaviour. Unfortunately, our thinking and emotions – and how we treat both – can lead us into some unhelpful patterns.

## Listening to the ‘passengers on the bus’

Imagine for a moment that you’re a bus driver. Your job is to pick up passengers and take them to their destination. Many of these passengers are a pleasure to deal with. In fact, they brighten your day as they complement you on how well you’re driving.

But it turns out not all your passengers are pleasant. In fact, some of them can be downright difficult to deal with! They shout at you from the back of the bus, criticising your driving, telling you to hurry up, to slow down, to take a different route. Some of them even tell you you’re not good enough to be doing this job and you should just give up and walk away.

Like most of the ways we talk about our inner life, this is a metaphor. The passengers on the bus are your thoughts and feelings and you can recognise that not all the thoughts and feelings you experience are pleasant. Sometimes, your own thoughts represent your harshest critic. Sometimes, your emotions lead you to make decisions you later regret.

If we listen to the passengers on the bus and believe everything they say, we are taking our thoughts to be literally true and viewing them as an instruction. *“They don’t trust me”, “I’m not good enough to apply for that job”, “If I speak up, they’ll judge me”*. We all have lots of thoughts which, if said aloud, might embarrass us. It doesn’t mean we should act on them.



At the same time, you wouldn't be a very professional bus driver if you kicked unpleasant passengers off your bus! You can't wrestle them to the ground and you can't silence them.

What you *can* do is continue on your route, doing what you think is best, while they continue to shout from the back. And with practice, while they won't go away, they will be less worrisome and intrusive.

## Acting on impulse

If we don't reflect on our values – those things that really matter to us, the standards of behaviour to which we aspire – then we can easily fall into the trap of using our passing emotions as a guide to what to do. In a sense, rather than doing the 'right' thing in a challenging situation, we do the 'easy' thing and let our emotions lead the way.

In many situations, letting your emotions out is fantastic. Think of all the wonderfully positive emotions you've experienced. Psychological flexibility isn't about suppressing emotions and turning them off (something we can't do, anyway). It's about knowing that when unhelpful emotions surface, they're not always a great source of advice.

We've all lost our temper and sent an email we later regret and probably slammed a few doors in our time too. But we later 'come to our senses' and apologise or regret our actions. The passing emotions evaporate and we see the situation differently, realising that we could have handled it better.

Psychological flexibility allows us to acknowledge troubling emotions, but not to use them as a prompt for what to do. Instead, we can reflect on our values and use these as our guide.

## A worrying past, a scary future

Think about how your mind wanders. While daydreaming can be pleasurable and result in some great new ideas, getting lost in your past disappointments or fixated on an imagined future, can be very unhelpful.

For many of us, our attention is constantly being pulled away from the present moment and we find ourselves revisiting old wounds or worrying about things that haven't even happened.

All the while, our present is unfolding in front of us, but we don't notice. There's only one place we can really be at any given moment and that's the present. Dwelling on past pain or worrying ourselves about how bad things *will* be prevents us from focusing on the here and now, where we're really needed. And when our mind wanders, we sometimes create unhelpful emotions that make it even more difficult to be the person we want to be.

Psychological flexibility gives us the mental clarity and focus to give the present the attention it deserves, freeing us from our past and future, so we can do the best we can right now.

## Sticking to the rules: the conceptualised self

When we think about ourselves, we can view who we are as a person as a set of facts. These are the stories we tell ourselves about who we are. These are the statements we use to describe how we 'should' be or 'must' be. *"I must never let my team down"*. *"I am a successful entrepreneur"*. *"I am a recognised leader in my field"*.

If you think for a moment about any of the concepts you apply to yourself, you'll quickly see that they're maybe not true in all situations. When we cling on to these rules and concepts, they can take on a rigid and unyielding quality. And when rules are broken, there are consequences. Here, the consequences arise when we evaluate our worth as a person or our success in life based on a small number of concepts, rather than the rich tapestry of qualities that make us who we are.

Psychological flexibility allows us to move away from focusing on our 'conceptualised self' and instead reflect on the contextual self, acknowledging that while we're a constant, we experience life in a variety of contexts and that if we can observe ourselves and our experience of the world, we can respond to it in a healthier and more effective way.

## “But that would be awful!”: Experiential avoidance

Picture yourself at the school disco, really wanting to ask someone to dance. But then you imagine them saying “no” and you clearly imagine the public embarrassment and the hurt of rejection. So, based on these imagined emotions, you decide not to ask anyone to dance. Sure, you’ll avoid all those emotions, but you’ll also miss out on potentially meeting someone amazing.

Our capacity to imagine what will happen because of our actions is part of what makes us human. However, this can work against us when we imagine the emotional consequences of our actions. Our decision on what to do next can be based on the discomfort associated with the emotions **we imagine we’ll feel**, not on whether the actions themselves are what is right for us in the circumstances.

If we avoid situations because of how we think they’ll make us feel, then we curtail our opportunities for growth and development. The discomfort associated with unpleasant thoughts and emotions isn’t actually painful, but it’s all too easy for us to restrict our life experiences in an effort to avoid them.

Psychological flexibility allows us to acknowledge that we’ll have difficult situations and we’ll experience discomfort **and** we can keep going.

## Psychological Flexibility in a nutshell

The previous section may paint a terrible picture of what it’s like to be a thinking, feeling human being. That’s not the case at all. These experiences are common to many of us and are perfectly normal. But if you recognise yourself in the descriptions and would like to make some changes, you can start to develop your own psychology flexibility by adhering to the following three principles. Once you’ve finished reading this guide, take a post-it note, write these three reminders on it and stick it somewhere you’ll see it every day.



## 1. Show up!

This is all about developing a mindful approach to life and remembering to remain aware of the “I, here, now” rather than memories from our past or imagined future states. Mindfulness has become a bit of a buzzword in recent times, so if the thought of meditation puts you off, don’t worry. Meditation is just one of the ways you can become more mindful.

To be more mindful doesn’t require you to sit cross-legged on the floor. Instead, think about the opportunities in your life for paying more attention to the task at hand, rather than getting lost in your mind or trying to concentrate on multiple things at the same time. Maybe you could take your next walk without your headphones and take in your surroundings rather than listening to music. Or eat your next meal without the TV or radio playing, instead focusing on the texture and taste of the food you’re eating.

And when you find your mind wandering, don’t worry – it’s natural. Simply gently bring your attention back to the “I, here, now” and focus on the present moment. There are some simple suggestions for how you can build a more mindful approach at the back of this guide.



## 2. Let go!

We can’t control our thoughts and we can’t remove emotional associations we’ve built up over time. And while emotions can be upsetting, many emotions are wonderful: joy, happiness, contentment, achievement. How would your life be if you felt no emotions?

So rather than focusing on changing our thoughts or suppressing our emotions, our energy is better served changing how we relate to our thoughts and emotions. We

can let go of the internal struggle with our ‘passengers on the bus’ and stop allowing them to have such an influence over our behaviour.

We can start to see thoughts and emotions for what they are – passing psychological experiences – rather than what they **say** they are: instructions for how we should live our lives. Our goal with ‘letting go’ is to put a bit of helpful space between us, our thoughts and our emotions. We can experience them – accepting them fully as a part of living a rich life – but at the same time weaken their influence over our behaviour. Remember: a thought is just a thought.



### 3. Get moving!

This is a crucial element of building psychological flexibility – taking action. Here, the emphasis is on clarifying your values and then putting them into practice on a regular basis. It doesn’t require you to change your life from top to bottom, instead make small manageable changes to your behaviour that reflect your values in action. It’s all about doing what matters, even if it’s tough. We can ignore the ‘passengers on the bus’ and take action in the direction we want to go. Moving towards what we want, rather than away from what we fear or dislike.

It’s useful to think of a ship’s compass when talking about values. The compass can help a ship reach its destination, even when storms prevent the crew from seeing the stars or the horizon.

You can start to identify and list your values using the space available at the back of this guide – but make sure you follow that by planning to put them into action on a daily basis.

## Psychological Flexibility in more detail

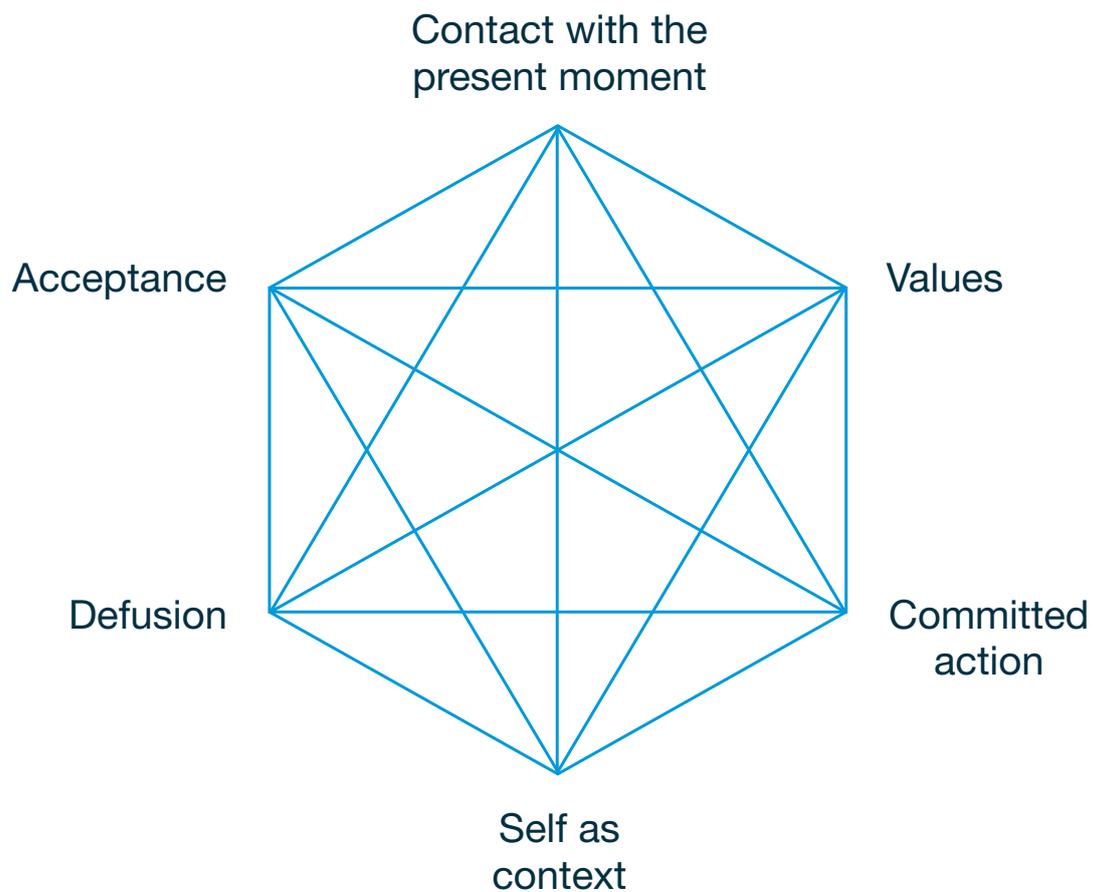
We outlined three themes to remember earlier in this guide, but there are actually six processes that make up psychological flexibility. If you simply “Show up, let go and get moving” you’re way ahead of the pack! But you may also find it useful to understand a little more about the concepts supporting this simple mantra.

Here’s how they map on to our ‘nutshell’ description from earlier:

	<b>Show up!</b>	Contact with the present moment Self-as-context
	<b>Let go!</b>	Acceptance Defusion
	<b>Get moving!</b>	Clarity of values Committed action

The six processes all support each other and there’s no one perfect place to start, when building psychological flexibility. They’re usually represented in the following way, to illustrate how building up one area supports the others. So, working on being more present and mindful can help you accept difficult thoughts, which can in turn help you take action that’s in line with your values.

Many people find it easiest to start with being more mindful and developing their contact with the present moment. But you can start where you like, knowing your efforts are paying off elsewhere.



## 1. Contact with the present moment

Be here now. This is all about developing a more acute awareness of what's happening here and now. You might think you're present, but your mind wanders constantly – taking you on journeys to your past and explorations of your future. This is different to when you intentionally want to remember something that's already happened or when you sit down to make plans for the future.

Unwelcome mental time-travel reminds you of your past setbacks and allows you to question your competence. It takes you to a future that hasn't happened yet and sets off an unhelpful emotional response that affects you in the present.

So, if you can be here now more often, you're less likely to upset yourself with unpleasant memories or difficult anticipated futures. You

can develop this present moment awareness very simply and we've outlined some things you might like to try at the back of this guide. While mindfulness meditation is definitely one way to build a more mindful approach to life, it's important to note that it's not the only way. This is key if you're put off by the idea of meditation. Taking a mindful walk or doing some breathing exercises can also help you.

Present moment awareness is all about intentionally noticing what's going on now. Being here now also makes it easier to work on the other elements of this model of psychological flexibility. They are, in fact, all interlinked and mutually supporting. But practicing a mindful approach to your work is a great place to start. And it allows us to experience what's going on inside – our inner life – quite differently.

## 2. Acceptance

Acceptance means opening up to unwelcome and unpleasant thoughts and emotions. We all have them from time to time, so it's nothing to be ashamed of or to be worried about. Anxiety before a big client presentation. Regret after an argument with a friend. Disappointment when we encounter a career setback at work. Harsh self-criticism when you find yourself running late for work – again!

The skill of acceptance is all about acknowledging thoughts and feelings that are unpleasant but not attempting to push them away or somehow suppress them. Firstly, that won't work and secondly, it uses up a lot of energy you could be spending on something more useful.

When we accept that we'll continue to have these kinds of internal experiences, we can stop wrestling with them or running away from them and use our energy for much more important things. Like putting our values into action and living a fulfilling life.

You can probably see how a mindful contact with the present moment will allow you to both notice the thought and emotions coming and going, but also support your ability to disentangle yourself from the thoughts and see them differently – a process we call Defusion.

### 3. Defusion

Defusion is all about changing your *relationship* with your thoughts. Over time, we can become ‘fused’ with our thoughts, seeing them as literal truths or instructions for how we should behave. We can over-identify with the thoughts that pass through our mind and, rather than questioning their validity or relevance, we take our cue from them.

This isn’t helpful if we experience thoughts like *“You’ll never be a success”* or *“Why bother applying for a promotion? They’ll never pick someone like you.”*

Imagine how you’d respond if someone else said that to you! But when we think it, it can quickly become our own reality.

Rather than accepting thoughts like this as literal truths that you need to act on, you can see them as passing mental experiences. One thought is quickly replaced by another. And another. And so on.

If we can get a little distance between ourselves and our thoughts, we can see them as temporary experiences, rather than instructions we need to follow. Visualising the thoughts as passing clouds can be helpful. As can exploring them with a different language, like “I’m having the thought that...”

When we develop cognitive defusion, we develop the capacity to **look at** thoughts, rather than **look through** the thoughts when making sense of the world.

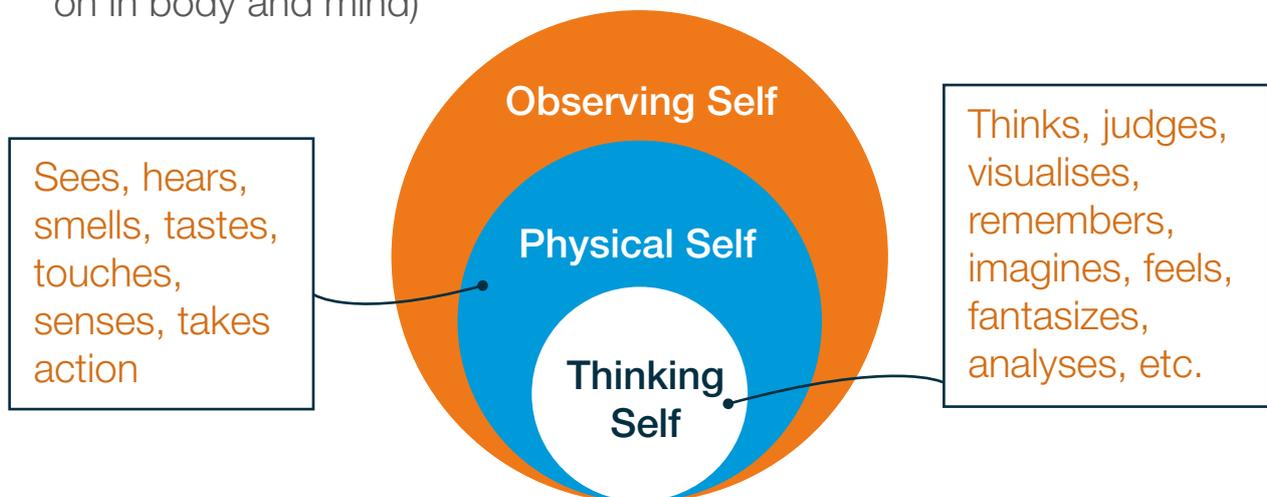
We can notice thoughts, rather than allowing ourselves to be caught up in them. We can experience them, not be directed by them unless it’s helpful to us.

## 4. Self-as-context

If developing the skill of present moment awareness allows us to more easily notice our thoughts and emotions, then we have to ask: what is doing the noticing? You use your eyes to see the screen in front of you and you use your mouth to eat your lunch. But what part of you **notices** that you're doing those things?

We don't really have a commonly-used word in English to describe this. One way to think about this is to be aware that we have three senses of self:

- 1 **Physical** self (our body)
- 2 **Thinking** self (our mind)
- 3 **Observing** self (the self that notices what's going on in body and mind)



It's the observing self that notices when your mind has wandered. It's the observing self that can see your thoughts and feelings as passing experiences. Developing a flexible observing self allows you to examine experiences from multiple perspectives. This is important when we think about ourselves and who we are.

By cultivating an awareness of the observing self, (usually called self-as-context) we can step back and see what's happening within us and not be limited by rigid self-concepts and rules that have built up over time.

We all have a story that we tell ourselves – the story of how we became who we are and what we stand for now. This can be problematic when we become too *attached* to this story and forget to realise that it contains our subjective interpretation, alongside the facts. Yes – in addition to the facts of a personal story (our age, our gender, where we were born), we add to this a plethora of our own perspectives on who we are, and not all of this is true or based on real events.

If we see this ‘conceptualised self’ as absolutely true, we can become fused with it and that can be limiting. Especially if our conceptualised self has echoes of *“I can never be a leader, because...”* or *“I must never let anyone down, ever!”*. Seeing the world through our self-as-concept means we’re bound to an interpretation of the world through that concept. And seeing as the concept isn’t 100% accurate, we’re setting ourselves up for disappointment and frustration.

You can probably see that by developing a mindful awareness and by practicing acceptance and defusion, it’s much easier to become aware of our observing self. All of this can contribute to a mental clarity that allows us to take action in a valued direction.

But first, we need to understand what values are important to us.

## 5. Clarity of Values

Organisations talk a lot about their values. Reading this, you might even be able to see your own organisation’s values printed on a poster or coffee mug. We each have our own values too – the standards of behaviour to which we aspire. When we’re clear on our own values, we know what matters and we can use our values like a compass to help us navigate challenging situations.

It’s important to note that values aren’t goals. The latter can be achieved at some point (e.g. getting that promotion, securing the new job, retiring at a certain age) whereas values are a continual work in progress. This is because the dynamic nature of life means we’re faced with new and interesting situations where we can try to live up to our values.

Getting clear on your values can seem like a daunting task, so we've added some resources in the back of this guide. But as an exercise in identifying what's important to you, it's incredibly useful. You can then use this statement of values to help you make important decisions and deal with the challenges you face.

## 6. Committed Action

This is all about putting your values into practice in a very intentional way. By planning how you're going to live your values each day and then taking small steps in the right direction, you're moving your values from a distant concept to a daily habit. That way, your values are at your disposal for when you really need them. And we know from research that living a values-led life is good for our mental health, our job satisfaction and our performance at work. It's important to understand that this involves taking action, **despite** what you're feeling and saying to yourself. Using your skills of Defusion and Acceptance to put distance between you and your thoughts and emotions will help, but values-led action will still involve conscious effort.

# Psychology Flexibility in Summary

So now that we've reviewed the various pieces of the psychological flexibility 'puzzle' separately, let's review it as a whole. By practicing the six processes we've outlined, you can develop your psychological flexibility, which in turn is beneficial for your mental health, your happiness and your effectiveness at work.

Essentially, it's about examining your inner life – thoughts and emotions – and intentionally viewing them from a different perspective. Untangling yourself from thoughts and emotions, clarifying your values and putting them into practice. All while maintaining a focus on the present moment.

Let's summarise this journey:

Psychological Inflexibility	Into	Psychological Flexibility
"Intrusion" of the unpleasant past or imagined future into the present.		Present moment awareness and a mindful approach to work.
Fusion of thoughts and beliefs – looking at life <b>through</b> our thoughts.		Defusion – the capacity to look at our thoughts and consider them for what they really are.
Experiential avoidance – our decisions our guided by our need to avoid unpleasant thoughts and emotions.		Acceptance that we will always have unpleasant thoughts and emotions.
Attachment to an inflexible conceptualised self – the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.		Development of the 'observing self' – being able to observe our inner experiences from a different perspective.
Using passing thoughts and emotions to guide our behaviour.		Using our values to guide our behaviour.
Stuck in patterns of unworkable action – withdrawal, self-defeating behaviours.		Actively putting our values into action, regardless of the difficulty.

# Getting started

Hopefully, this guide has inspired you to develop your own psychological flexibility. What follows is an introduction to some activities you can start by yourself: simple ways to be more mindful, identifying your values, and then putting them into action.

## 1. Simple ways to be more mindful



### 1. Take ten deep breaths

A simple, but effective technique. Close your eyes and simply take ten deep breaths, one after another. Instead of problem solving, planning or worrying, focus only on the movement of your body as your breath enters and leaves your body. What happens to your shoulders? Your back? Your chest and abdomen? Once finished, consider how different you feel and how much your perspective has changed.



### 2. “Drop anchor”

Another simple technique that you can try at your desk. It's best experienced seated, wherever you are. Place both feet firmly on the floor and close your eyes. Now focus internally on the physical feeling of your feet making contact with the floor. Explore the distribution of your body's weight across your two feet. Is it even? Are you favouring one foot? Now explore the feeling of where your body is making contact with the chair. The back of your knees perhaps. Where you're sitting. How the small of your back feels. Now your upper back and neck. Explore the sensations from the bottom up, take a couple of deep breaths and move on with your day.



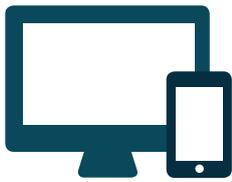
### 3. Go for a mindful walk

How can a walk be mindful? It can, if you only focus on your walking. No talking, no listening to music, no eating or trying to solve problems. Focus only on the physical sensation of walking, making yourself more aware of how your body moves you from place to place. If ever there was an activity we do on automatic pilot, it's walking! Explore how your feet make contact with the ground, how your knees bend and how the distribution of your weight changes as you step forward. Be mindful of your arms and how they move too. You'll quickly notice that your body goes through an amazingly complex series of movements just to keep you walking.



### 4. Notice 5 things

Take a moment to pay close attention to your immediate surroundings. No matter how familiar you are with your location, try to notice five new things which you haven't paid attention before now. It might be something on your desk, something attached to the wall, or a piece of furniture. Pay close attention to it, like it's the first time you've seen it. Examine it mentally, considering all its features and what makes it different to the objects around it. This is all about using a laser-like focus on objects in the present while also stepping back from multi-tasking, to help you avoid an unhelpful focus on the past or future.



## 5. Guided meditation

You may find it helpful to engage in mindfulness meditation. If you're unsure about how to make a start, you may find it useful to use a guided meditation app on your smartphone. This involves you listening to a professional guide you through a meditation technique while you close your eyes. The app provides the soundtrack and all you have to do is close your eyes and follow the instructions. Many people like to be guided through meditation when they're just starting off. We recommend 'Headspace' as one option, though many others are available.



## 2. Identifying and living your values

### What are my values?

Values are the ways of being to which you aspire. They're not goals, which can be attained. For example, getting a promotion is a goal. Being professional at work is a value. Retiring early is a *goal*, being family-oriented is a *value*.

It can be challenging to identify your values from scratch, so we have two options for you to explore. You can look at the questions on the following pages and see if they help you identify what's important to you.



**What values do you associate with your career?**

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**What values do you associate with your personal relationships?**

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**What values do you associate with your family relationships?**

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**What values do you associate with your personal development and growth?**

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**What values do you associate with your social and leisure time?**

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**What values do you associate with your health and general wellbeing?**

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Alternatively you can download the values card pack from our website ([www.worklifepsych.com/psychologicalflexibility](http://www.worklifepsych.com/psychologicalflexibility)) and sort them into three piles:

1. values that aren't important to you,
2. those that are important to you and
3. those that are most important to you.



This final set of values is the one you'll put into action.

### How can I put my values into action?

Firstly, it's important to note that you're probably putting many of your values into action already. This approach is all about putting you in connection with your values in a more explicit and obvious way. Thinking about your values clearly and making a plan to put them into action will mean you're less likely to use passing thoughts and emotions as your 'compass' when making decisions and interacting with others.

The secret is to start small and then add changes as you go along. Pick one of your most important values and then identify ways you'll put it into action in the coming two weeks. Consider small changes you can make to your behaviour which are in alignment with this chosen value.

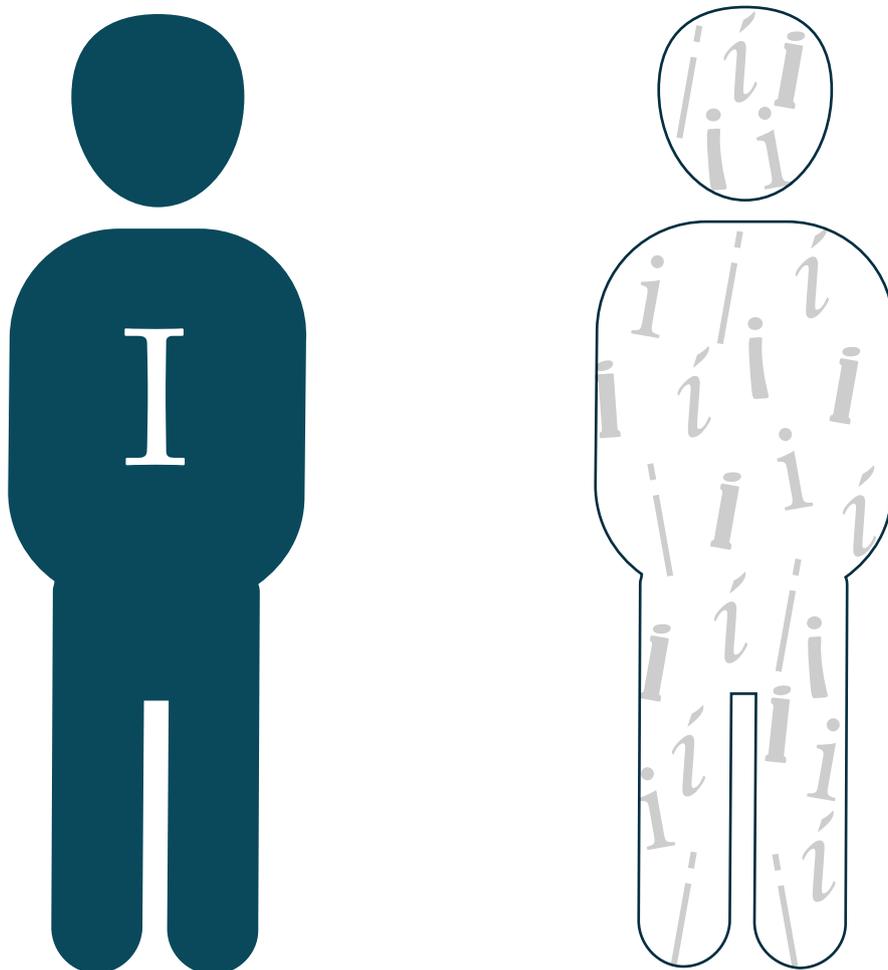
For example, if one of your values was looking after your health, you might decide to get off the bus to work a few stops early and walk the remaining distance to your office. If one of your most important values is about focus on your family, you may decide to arrange one meal every week where all the family are present.

### 3. Challenging your conceptualised self

As a simple but revealing exercise to explore your conceptualised self, you can look at the difference between your 'Big I' and 'Little i'. Look at the image below – on the left-hand side is a person who has a very inflexible self-concept based on one or two core beliefs about how they are and should be. On the right-hand side, we've left space for you to fill your image with:

- Things that you're not very good at
- Things that you're good at
- Things that are neutral about you

This is to illustrate the difference between evaluating yourself on a single 'Big I' concept and considering who you are more flexibly by reflecting on all the 'little i's that make up who you are.



# Developing Psychological Flexibility at Dentsu Aegis Network

dentsu AEGIS network

## What we did

WorkLifePsych started working with the Dentsu Aegis Network (DAN) senior leadership team in Ireland in January 2017. Our brief was to create a bespoke development programme alongside one-to-one coaching for the team.

After conducting a thorough needs analysis and review of the business strategy, we designed a series of interactive workshops. These sessions covered topics such as team dynamics, psychological flexibility, relationship management and power and politics in organisations.

The topic of psychological flexibility resonated with the senior leadership team on a number of levels. They saw the relevance of being clear on your personal goals and exploring how these align with those of the business as a whole. But they also saw how it could positively impact their experience of dealing with everyday pressures and their interactions with colleagues.

We were able to weave the concepts of psychological flexibility into individual coaching programmes where this was appropriate, providing a level of alignment

and continuity that the team members really appreciated. They could then individually take these concepts and skills and put them into practice in a way that best suited their development focus, their environment and their teams.

The senior leadership team recognised that developing psychological flexibility is important for the wellbeing of all staff and therefore asked us to develop a series of short taster sessions which could be attended by larger groups of colleagues at DAN. Our “Psychological Flexibility 101” taster sessions run for 90 minutes and provide an insight into a key concept and give attendees one or two practical skills to take away and implement immediately.

## Next steps

While the programme for the senior leadership team revisits the Psychological Flexibility skills in each module, we’ll be rolling out a series of further 101 sessions for more junior team members at DAN covering values, dealing with difficult thoughts and emotions and putting plans into action.

### **Lorraine O’Sullivan, Group People Director Ireland had this to say:**

*“As a senior leadership team, we really enjoyed the module Richard designed for us on Psychological Flexibility. But more importantly, it struck a chord with us and enabled us to see many of our everyday challenges from a very different perspective. Putting the skills - such as mindfulness – into practice makes a real difference, so I was keen to expose many more of the team at DAN to the core ideas.*

*We asked Richard to run a few of his 101 sessions and 55 of my colleagues signed up for the initial workshops. I was really impressed with their feedback and their comments in the brief online survey we used afterwards illustrated just how keen they were to learn more and start putting this all into practice.*

*We will be rolling out a further series of sessions to put team members in touch with their values and start to develop the other practical skills like mindfulness and defusion.”*

## Where can I learn more?

We can provide:

- **Coaching on a one-to-one level.** Our team coaches people at all organisational levels, from recent graduates to members of the c-suite.
- **Psychological flexibility workshops for groups.** We can take whole teams through the psychological flexibility journey together. This training can be organised in a way that minimises disruption to the working day and is spread over several short sessions. This also gives team members the opportunity to practice their skills in between sessions.
- **An introductory ‘Psychological Flexibility 101’ workshop.** This is perfect for larger groups, where the aim is to increase awareness of the benefits of a mindful and values-led approach to work. Lasting just 90 minutes, we take the group through the models outlined in this guide and practically explore mindfulness and values selection.
- **Psychological flexibility modules for existing management or leadership development activities in your organisation.** We can create bespoke modules and workshops to seamlessly fit into your existing structured development programmes. We can ensure that the content reflects your development aims and feels a core part of the programme.

If you're interested in learning more about how psychological flexibility can help you or your workplace, get in touch.

Contact us by email at [info@worklifepsych.com](mailto:info@worklifepsych.com) or by phone at **+44 (0)20 7947 4417**. Or simply visit the [worklifepsych.com](http://worklifepsych.com) website.

## About WorkLifePsych

The 21st century workplace can be a challenging place. With the constant flow of emails and endless rounds of meetings, it can be a struggle to manage ever-increasing workloads while maintaining some semblance of life outside work. All this, while finding the time to focus, be creative, solve problems, think strategically and develop others.

We are a team of occupational psychologists who support individuals, teams and organisations to develop their effectiveness, productivity and wellbeing. We call this 'whole-person development' and see these three areas as core to individual and in turn, organisational success.

Our approach is to develop people from a whole person perspective, acknowledging that they have lives outside the workplace, multiple roles within their lives and strengths and development areas across all these areas. It's pointless to ignore who we are outside of work when we're trying to be our very best when at work.

